

Current Catholic Liturgical Options Vis-a-Vis Jews and Judaism

J. Frank Henderson

Frank Henderson's Site on Liturgy and Medieval Women

www.jfrankhenderson.com

© J. Frank Henderson

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on Liturgical Issues in Christian-Jewish Relations, held at Boston College in June, 2001.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to suggest ways in which sensitivity to Jews and Judaism can be promoted in liturgical celebrations of the Roman Catholic Church. These suggestions are based on liturgical books now in use and on current official documents such as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass, etc. They fall into the category of liturgical "implementation" rather than "innovation," and can be carried out immediately; for the most part they are localized at the level of the parish.

Suggestions regarding liturgical celebration with sensitivity to Jews and Judaism necessarily are based on prior consideration of elements of the present Roman Catholic liturgy that may be problematic in this regard. This in turn needs to be based on principles that guide Catholic-Jewish relations. This paper will therefore begin with these matters.

In some cases questions that are of interest just to Roman Catholics intersect with those of sensitivity to Jews and Judaism. In addition, questions of sensitivity to Jews and Judaism sometimes have to do with matters that go beyond the liturgy. Some of these complications will be named briefly.

Finally, this discussion also leads logically to consideration of possible future liturgical revisions that will require the approval of the bishops and of Rome.

Principles

For the sake of brevity the “Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations” published by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the U.S. Catholic bishops (1985 revision) will be taken as an appropriate statement of principles.¹ Salient points of this document are summarized as follows.

Jews . . . are not to be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from Holy Scripture.²

Special care should be taken never to use the pulpit to portray Judaism as rejected by God or in any way unworthy of our love and esteem.³

School texts, prayerbooks and other media should . . . continue to be examined in order to remove not only those materials that do not accord with the content and spirit of the Church’s teaching, but also those that fail to show Judaism’s continuing role in salvation history in a positive light.⁴

Scholarly studies and education efforts: this involves not only appreciation of the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of faith with their own perpetual value, but also a recognition of Judaism as a living tradition that has had a strong and creative religious life through the centuries since the birth of Christianity from the common root.⁵

The presentation of the Crucifixion story should be made in such a way as not to implicate all Jews of Jesus’ time or of today in a collective guilt for the crime.⁶

An explicit rejection should be made of the historically inaccurate notion that Judaism of that time, especially that of Pharisaism, was a decadent formalism and hypocrisy.⁷

Further analysis of the use and implications for today of such expressions as “the Jews” in St. John and other New Testament references that appear to place all Jews in a negative light is also called for.⁸

I would add: The Jewishness of Jesus should not be denied or misrepresented.

Questions and Concerns

In light of these principles, what elements of the present Roman Catholic liturgy might be considered problematic? For the sake of brevity most attention is given to Sundays, Solemnities (Festivals) and Seasons. Likewise, the present focus is on the use of scripture in the liturgy.⁹ The following is a brief list of questions and concerns regarding sensitivity to Jews and Judaism.

Use of the Hebrew Scriptures

First, it is important to note that the Hebrew Scriptures are used in the modern Roman Catholic liturgy in a variety of ways. Each type of use needs to be assessed with respect to the principles enunciated above.

A. Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are not read at the Sunday Eucharist during the Easter season. “The first reading is from Acts, which throughout the Easter season replaces the Old Testament readings.”¹⁰

What message does this omission convey? Is this necessary or appropriate?

B. On the Sundays of Lent there is one reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. “The Old Testament readings are about the history of salvation, which is one of the themes proper to the catechesis of Lent. The series of texts for each Year presents the main elements of salvation history from its beginning until the promise of the New Covenant.”¹¹

Does “salvation history” in this context – that is, as understood by Christians in the context of the liturgy – provide the appreciation of “the Hebrew Scriptures as a source of faith with their own perpetual value” that is one of the principles stated above? Does this “recognize Judaism as a living tradition that has had a strong and creative religious life through the centuries since the birth of Christianity from the common root?” Does “salvation history” have multiple meanings? Is it necessarily supersessionist? Certainly it is open to such an interpretation.

C. Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are a prominent part of the Easter Vigil liturgy. “On the holy night of the Easter Vigil there are seven Old Testament readings, recalling the wonderful works of God in the history of salvation.”¹²

The previously stated questions regarding “salvation history” apply here as well.

D. During Advent readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are taken mostly from Isaiah. “The Old Testament readings are prophecies about the Messiah and the Messianic age, especially from Isaiah.”¹³

Does this require a supersessionist interpretation of the season of Advent? Does this messianic approach to biblical interpretation apply to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole? Does this apply to the Hebrew Scriptures in all their usages in the Roman Catholic liturgy?

E. During the roughly one half of the liturgical year that Roman Catholic call “Ordinary Time,” there is one reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. “[T]he texts of both the apostolic and gospel readings are arranged in an order of semicontinuous reading, whereas the Old Testament reading is harmonized with the gospel.”¹⁴ “The present order of Readings selects Old Testament

texts mainly because of their correlation with New Testament texts read in the same Mass, and particularly with the gospel text.”¹⁵

Does this relationship between gospel reading and passage from the Hebrew Scriptures respect the latter as ”source of faith with their own perpetual value,” as the bishops’ principles state?

F. Another type of usage is employed in the Revised Common Lectionary. As an alternative to the approach stated in E, above, on the Sundays after Pentecost readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are arranged on a semicontinuous basis, without immediate relationship with the gospel of the day. This is done “by way of a broader concept of correlation having to do with the Old Testament concerns of the three synoptic gospels” (Introduction to the Revised Common Lectionary.¹⁶ For example, for year A, “One set of Old Testament lessons is a semicontinuous series of readings that focus on the major Genesis narratives, the covenant with Moses, and the establishment of Israel in the promised land.”¹⁷ Though Roman Catholic scholars participated in the preparation of the Revised Common Lectionary, it has not been adopted for use in the Roman Catholic Church..

G. Certain Roman Catholic liturgies contain prayers that refer to stories from the Hebrew Scriptures through allusion to biblical persons and events, for example the thanksgiving over water in liturgies of baptism/Christian initiation,

In general these prayers show respect for the Hebrew Scriptures, whose stories are taken as models for Christians.

F. Finally, it may be suggested that, at the popular level, some passages from the Hebrew Scriptures have simply been “christianized.” That is, their source, biblical context and Jewish use have been forgotten and they are treated as if they were part of the Christian Scriptures. This category would seem to include the suffering servant passages of Isaiah and prophetic passages associated with Advent and Christmas.

At the very least this might be seen as disrespectful.

Use of the Christian Scriptures

A number of questions and concerns arise with respect to the liturgical use of the Christian Scriptures; the following is merely a summary list of some of the more important issues.

A. Claims of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. Such accusations are communicated – or may be understood to be communicated – in the passion narratives of the four gospels and also in certain readings from the Acts of the Apostles.

B. “The Jews” as symbols of opposition to Jesus and of evil. As referred to above in the U.S. bishops’ principles, some of the language of John’s gospel is problematic in this regard. Likewise, there is a focus on conflict between Jesus and “the Jews” through large parts of this gospel.

C. Negative portrayal of the Pharisees. Gospel passages used in the liturgy include some that show Pharisees in a bad light.

D. Negative view of the “Law” and of the Jewish people. This type of language sometimes appears in apostolic letters used as second readings.

E. Explicitly supersessionist texts. The lectionary readings include passages from the Letter to the Hebrews and some other supersessionist sources.

F. Minimal use of positive assessments of Jews and Judaism. Though such passages exist, as in Romans 9-11, the Sunday lectionary uses few of these.

Good Friday and Passion Sunday

The Good Friday liturgy includes a passion narrative, a suffering servant passage from Isaiah, and the reproaches. The Passion Sunday liturgy includes passion narratives and a suffering servant passage. These liturgies can be understood as blaming Jews for the death of Jesus, though they need not be understood in this way.

Other issues for Catholics include the paschal character of Good Friday and the unity of the paschal mystery; the relationship of Good Friday and Passion Sunday; the preeminence of John’s gospel; and the theology of atonement. At the level of popular theology, Good Friday may still be seen as the climax of Lent and theologically separate from Easter.

Other Sundays of Lent

Readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are chosen according to the criterion of “salvation history”; questions regarding this have already been raised.

Some readings from the Christian Scriptures include negative references to Pharisees, “the Jews” and the Law.

Other issues for Catholics include tensions between a vision of Lent as a penitential period and as a period of preparation for baptism. In addition, the readings for Year A have a different character than those for Years B and C. At the level of popular theology, some may still think of Lent as the story of the last period of Jesus’ life and of a time of conflict with his opponents, who seek his death.

Easter Vigil

As considered above, the seven readings from the Hebrew Scriptures are understood in terms of “salvation history.”

In addition, the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures are read in relative darkness. After they have been proclaimed, “the altar candles are lighted [and more lights often are turned on], and the priest intones the Glory to God, which is taken up by all present. The church bells are rung, according to local custom.”¹⁸ What messages are communicated by these nonverbal elements.

Another issue for Catholics is the integration of Easter and Good Friday in the great three-day festival called the Easter or Paschal Triduum.

Easter Season

Passages from the Hebrew Scriptures are not included in the lectionary for this season. Some passages from the Acts of the Apostles used as first readings claim Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus.

Another issue for Catholics is the baptismal orientation of the Easter season.

Advent

The Advent liturgies traditionally are understood in terms of discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity; they are considered to be supersessionist in intent.

I personally believe that Advent can also -- or instead -- be understood in terms of continuity between Judaism and Christianity. The interpretation of these liturgies depends in part on the attitudes one brings to them. (I have prepared a commentary on Advent from the perspective of continuity.¹⁹)

The Introduction to the Lectionary, already quoted, supports discontinuity: “The Old Testament readings are prophecies about the Messiah and the Messianic age especially from Isaiah.”²⁰

Advent also presents other challenges to Christians. It asks for considerable imagination, and is not served by biblical literalism. It involves three time dimensions: Christ’s coming in the past, in the present and in the future. The future element is associated with an “already but not

yet,” which may be difficult for people to grasp. John the Baptist is featured on the second and third Sundays, which means that the time frame is not the birth of Jesus but some 30 years later; yet at a popular level he is sometimes treated as having lived before the birth of Jesus. The Advent season is brief, especially when only the four Sundays are celebrated; the rich weekday liturgy is not celebrated by most people. Advent is very much in the shadow of Christmas, and cannot help but be influenced by the secular Christmas of our culture.

Furthermore, “popular theology” is particularly influential during Advent, perhaps more so than the church’s liturgy. There is Handel’s *Messiah*, with its pastiche of passages from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, great artistic beauty and cultural popularity. There are the omnipresent Christmas (and Advent) carols, some of which are explicitly supersessionist and many of which use images of darkness and light to convey an implicit supersessionism. There are the common simplifications of Advent theology for children which tend to diminish the element of the future coming of Christ and the “already but not yet” character of the incarnation. There are traditional messianic interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures that seem to be embedded in our culture. There are the views and practices of other churches, which may be quite happy with supersessionism.

Current Catholic Liturgical Options

What can local parishes and their pastors do to make celebrations of the Roman Catholic liturgy as sensitive as possible to Jews and Judaism? Certainly not all of the questions and concerns listed above can be dealt with at the parish level. What might be done that is within the category of “implementation” of the official liturgical books and associated documents? Here are a few suggestions that might be considered in this regard.

Liturgical Matters

A. Use of official options. The rubric dealing with the reproaches of the Good Friday liturgy indicates that they are optional, hence may be replaced by other texts. “During the veneration [of the cross] the antiphon, ‘We worship you, Lord,’ the reproaches, or other suitable songs are sung.”²¹ In recent years national liturgical offices have recommended the use of appropriate psalms in place of the reproaches.

B. Introductions to readings. Appropriate spoken introductions may be provided for the scripture readings. “There may be concise introductions before the readings, especially the first. The style proper to such comments must be respected, that is, they must be simple, faithful to the text, brief, well prepared, and properly varied to suit the text they introduce.”²²

An example of such an introduction follows; it was published by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and was intended for the reading of the passion on Passion Sunday.

The drama of Lent reaches its climax in our reading of the passion according to St. Luke. The Roman officials of Palestine, led by Pontius Pilate, together with a few officials from the Jerusalem Temple, misunderstood Jesus' mission. Let's not make the mistake of blaming the whole Jewish people (of 33 AD or today) for Jesus' death. Since we sin, the cry "crucify him" is our cry. Ours too is the hope of the thief, that we will one day hear Jesus' word of forgiveness: "I assure you, this day you will be with me in paradise."²³

C. Caution regarding "dramatic" proclamations of the passion narratives and other readings. The force of individual elements of the passion narrative, for example, can be affected in undesirable ways by the use of dramatized versions or proclamation by multiple readers – though this need not always be the case.

D. Possible use of short forms of some readings. Some scripture readings exist in two versions, longer and shorter, for example the passion narratives on Passion Sunday (but not on Good Friday) and the gospel of the man born blind on Lent 4A. In some cases the shorter version might be more sensitive to Jews and Judaism than the longer, but each case needs to be evaluated separately.

E. Preaching. The homily is of course an excellent occasion to teach, offer corrections, and express positive views regarding Jews and Judaism. However, the liturgical homily is not primarily didactic in nature, there are other matters to deal with besides Jews and Judaism, and there is not much time. Appendix 1 gives some suggestions for homilists published by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

F. Choice of music. The texts and music of songs and hymns used in the liturgy often are to be chosen by parish liturgists and musicians. Care especially needs to be taken in Advent and the Christmas season to avoid supersessionist texts. Music is also a legitimate subject for preaching.

G. Choice of art. Depictions of the passion and other biblical stories should be careful in their depictions of Jews; attempts to distinguish between Jews who were followers of Jesus and those who were not are fraught with danger. It is fortunate in this regard that the traditional Stations of the Cross involve mainly Romans as agents of his passion and crucifixion.

H. General intercessions (prayers of the faithful). On Good Friday the text of these prayers is given in the sacramentary/missal and a prayer for the well-being of the Jewish people is included. Similar prayers, composed locally, may be used on any Sunday but may be especially appropriate at the time of major Jewish festivals.

I. Emendation of texts. Might the term "the Jews" in passion narratives, for example, be replaced by "Judeans," "religious authorities," or "Temple officials" or the like? Practice has differed in different places; a recent Vatican document does not permit such emendation.²⁴

Liturgical Aids

A second set of suggestions has to do with resources that are intended to aid participation in the liturgy by the people and assist worship leaders in their ministries.

A. The Liturgical Calendar (*Ordo*). This is a small book, printed annually, that helps worship planners and leaders know what to do on a day to day basis. In Canada it is published by the bishops,²⁵ in the United States I understand that it is published by commercial publishers. This may be used for educational use as well.

In the Canadian edition, the Liturgical Calendar includes a note for Passion Sunday, with a cross reference from Good Friday, regarding sensitivity to Jews and Judaism. This is given as Appendix 2.

The Canadian Liturgical Calendar also includes, toward the beginning, a section that tells briefly about the major Jewish festivals, and in the body of the book, on the appropriate day, the beginning of each Jewish festival is noted.

C. Preaching aids. A large number of publications aimed at helping preachers are on the market. These might be evaluated with respect to sensitivity to Jews and Judaism and suggestions for improvement made to publishers.

D. Sunday bulletins. Aids to participation in the liturgy for laity are published commercially and also prepared by individual parishes. They vary in quality and probably, in sensitivity to Jews and Judaism. Efforts might be made to help publishers and parishes produce good materials.

E. Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and related formation processes. These rites and processes are intended for unbaptized persons who seek to become Catholic Christians and for baptized persons who seek full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. These processes ought to include appropriate formation and education regarding Jews and Judaism; this may or may not occur, but ought to be encouraged.

F. U. S. bishops' "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations." These, or a summary, should be published widely as a liturgical resource, e.g., in the Liturgical Calendar.

Liturgical Changes

Though the "implementation" issues just outlined are of considerable significance, they are also limited in nature and in scope. Further progress will involve additional study of theological and biblical issues. In addition, model alternative liturgies can be developed, studied and evaluated. The most recent Vatican document, however, rules out any changes in liturgical texts at present.²⁶

Appendix 1. Challenge for Preachers, Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 1977

The already challenging task of the homilist during Holy Week is to make present the redemptive nature of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. In a time-conscious and multi-media age, this is no light or easy charge. Is the already stretched homiletic seven minutes asked to bear another sensitivity, another prescribed homily topic – removing anti-Semitic images?

This would provide an ill-fated pastoral trap. We are not asked to add, nor are we asked to isolate – rather we are asked to integrate. The Passion account is highly charged. It is an account of conflict. The events of the Passion account in all the gospels are, for the most part, reflections of an inter-familial struggle. All the actors in the drama, with the exception of Pilate and other Romans, are Jews –including Jesus, his disciples and followers. This struggle is heightened with the escalation of the inter-familial tension between Jewish Christians and other Jews. We can approach the ultimate purpose of accurately presenting the mystery-reality of redemption in an integrated fashion, without doing harm to the integrity of our proclamation.

How do we create such an integrated approach? We have indicated the do nots: do not add length; do not simply preach on anti-Semitism. Ignoring the Hellenistic influences, historical developments and textual difficulties we should personally place ourselves in the passion narrative; we should acknowledge our personal failure to accept the gospel message. But weaving this within our homily we invite our congregation to personalize the passion event.

The homilist is asked not to lose the overall image of the fabric of revelation – God’s eternal and forgiving love for all mankind. The homilist must place that forgiving love in the historical events of Christ’s passion as well as in the continued drama of the present journey of the Jew and Christian of today. The Jew and Christian of today are pilgrim people with these truths written on their hearts: God always cared for his people, continues to care and always will. Among his people, Christian and Jew, there have always been those who are faithful and trusting. Among his people, Christian and Jews, there have always been those who did not remain faithful and trusting.²⁷

Appendix 2. Note for Passion Sunday and Good Friday: Canadian Liturgical Calendar.

Each year we Christians celebrate the central mystery of our faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and each year our Jewish neighbours celebrate the feast of Passover commemorating God’s liberation and protection of the Jewish people in the exodus from Egypt. The links between the two feasts are profound. Easter, the Christian feast of liberation, grew out of the Jewish feast of the Passion. Jesus and his disciples, as faithful Jews, were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate this great festival. It was in the context of this festival that Jesus’ life drew to an end.

The importance of our Jewish heritage cannot be overemphasized. Pope Pius XI called us to remember that spiritually we are all Semites. Abraham, Sarah, Moses, the prophets, Ruth, Esther, Mary, the apostles, Paul – all these heroes and models of our faith are Jews.

Yet, during the holy days immediately preceding Easter, especially when the Passion account is being read or meditated upon, we can unwittingly or unwillingly transmit certain anti-Semitic impressions. Before reading the account of the Passion (especially according to St. John) it would be well for us to recall that when the evangelist refers to “the Jews,” we know he is not saying that all Jews, either or Jesus’ time or our time, are responsible for his death. Pilate, along with some members of Sanhedrin, cannot avoid their responsibility, but as Christians we must remember: “Christ, out of infinite love, freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all people, so that all might attain salvation. It is the duty of the Church, therefore, in its preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God’s universal love and the source of all grace” (Vatican Council II, Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, no. 4).

All who are called to preach the word of God or to transmit it by the spoken or written word are asked to guard against the possibility of transmitting prejudice or false interpretations of scripture as we celebrate these important feasts.²⁸

Notes

- 1 *Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations*, 1985 Revision. Prepared by the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Washington DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1985.
- 2 *Guidelines*, p. 1, quoted from Vatican Council II’s *Nostra Aetate*, n. 4.
- 3 *Guidelines*, p. 5, n. 4
- 4 *Guidelines*, p. 5, n. 5
- 5 *Guidelines*, p. 6, n. 10a
- 6 *Guidelines*, p. 6, n. 10b
- 7 *Guidelines*, p. 7, n. 10e
- 8 *Guidelines*, p. 7, n. 10g.

- 9 For “Hebrew Scriptures” used here, others might say “First Testament” or “Old Testament.” For “Christian Scriptures” used here, others might say “Second Testament” or “New Testament”.
- 10 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 99. This document is printed in editions of *the Lectionary for Mass*. It is also included in collections such as M.A. Simcoe, ed., *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resources*, revised edition (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1985)
- 11 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 97
- 12 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 99
- 13 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 93
- 14 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 67
- 15 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 67
- 16 Introduction to the *Revised Common Lectionary*, n. 43. *The Revised Common Lectionary*. Prepared by the Consultation on Common Texts. Winfield BC: Wood Lake Books, 1992. Introduction.
- 17 Introduction to the *Revised Common Lectionary*, n. 49
- 18 *Sacramentary* (title in Canada); *Roman Missal* (title in U.S.), rubric for Easter Vigil
- 19 J. Frank Henderson, “Advent,” *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, vol. 29, no 146, Fall 1996, pp 131-173.
- 20 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 93
- 21 *Sacramentary / Roman Missal*, rubrics for Good Friday
- 22 Introduction to the *Lectionary for Mass*, n. 15
- 23 *Lenten Pastoral Reflection: Homiletic and Pastoral Aids for Catholic-Jewish Interaction in Lenten and Holy Week Liturgies*. Lent 1977. Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (Los Angeles Priest-Rabbi Committee). Los Angeles: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles 1977.
- 24 *Instruction Liturgiam Authenticam*, nn.34-44. By the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, May 7, 2001. *Origins*, vol. 31, no. 2, May 24,

2001, pp 17-32.

25 *Guidelines of Pastoral Liturgy: Liturgical Calendar* (Ottawa: CCCB Publications [published annually])

26 *Instruction Liturgiam Authenticam*, n.29.

27 *Lenten Pastoral Reflections*, pp 2-3.

28 *Guidelines for Passtoral Liturgy: Liturgical Calendar*, n.30.

